HATCHING not HEN'S BUSINESS

By
DOROTHY SPUR

SHALL I EVER FORGET the year I spent on a big B.C. poultry farm! It was just after the last war when the housing shortage was so acute and I literally was without a roof over my head. So when I heard that there was "good living accommodation" as well as a salary for anyone who would be willing to live in the country and act as secretary I hot-footed it and secured the position.

Before my introduction to the "hen and egg industry" an egg to me was just an egg so long as it was fresh, and a chicken might be a hen or a rooster for all I knew to the contrary. But not so any more! I had to distinguish between Grade A large, medium and pullet eggs as well as peewees; hatching eggs and eggs for consumption; hens, pullets, roosters, roasters, boilers, broilers, fryers and so on.

Oh yes! In my innocence I thought the old hen hatched her brood, bringing them forth from the egg and raising them in the good old-fashioned style. I had heard of incubators and seen pictures of what looked to me to be fair-sized boxes in which eggs could be hatched. But I had put that away somewhere in the back of my mind.

But on this farm the incubator was no mere box. It was a good-sized building filled from floor to ceiling with electrically-heated and controlled compartments which contained the eggs, warmed them, cooled them, turned them and finally hatched them without the aid of the hen, who merely did the laying. When filled to capacity, 60,000 eggs could be incubated at one time. The hatches "came off" twice a week during the hatching season, from January to approximately May, and varied in number from 5,000 to 8,000—and then we all went completely mad!

Now wouldn't you think that selling day-old chicks would be much the same as selling any other form of produce? I certainly did when I blithely undertook my secretarial duties. There is no similarity whatsoever between the sale of chicks and any other product. And wouldn't you also imagine that you could put 5,000 eggs in an incubator and that 5,000 chicks would come out, so that you could book your order the same way as you would for 5,000 pounds of sugar? Heavenly day! I learned.

The hatch would "come off" and we in the office, having previously made out invoices for the expected 5,000, would sit in fear and trembling wondering what we would get—would it be 4,500 or 3,500, or what? Sometimes it was more than estimated, sometimes less.

EVENTUALLY I learned that it was not such a hit-and-miss arrangement as I had thought, because the hatch was always "estimated" before setting, on a percentage basis. The trouble was the eggs often let us down for a variety of reasons—cold weather, power failures, blasting in the district which could disrupt a whole hatch, and so on. To this day I have not made up my mind which was worse—the more or the less in the hatch. If we had more chicks than were ordered for a particular date, they had to be sold and we wildly searched the order files to see if we could find some kind customer who would agree to take the little balls of fluff a week or so earlier than ordered, when probably they had no brooder ready. Having dug such a customer out of the files we would then have to phone him, or her, and in our most honeyed tones put forward our most persuasive arguments to induce them to receive the little things—and they were little darlings.

I remember one particular hatch when I was alone in the office. The hatch "came off" and we had 600 chicks too many. How to dispose of them I did not know. I had phoned everyone who seemed a likely prospect and time was flying fast, for chicks must be shipped within 48 hours of hatching. They receive their first feed after 48 hours and must not be fed while in transit. At last I found a lady customer who would consider taking them. But she had a coal brooder and no coal. It was Saturday and none could be procured before Monday. I tried to tell her she could keep the little ones in the kitchen until the coal arrived. But she was not agreeable. Well, the long and short of it was that she was finally persuaded to take the chicks when I offered to send with them a sack of coal, plus a sack of feed for the initial feeding. So off they went and the day was saved.

In fact, the way we managed to juggle those orders to fit the hatches is still a source of amazement to me, for only once in the 12 months I was on the farm did we have to kill surplus chicks. Believe me, it took some doing.

An even worse situation arose when the hatch was "short," for then customers who had their brooders ready were disappointed when informed that we might or might not be able to deliver from the next hatch. This meant moving all other orders forward.

Another problem—in fact the toughest for all hatcheries—is the customer who decides to cancel his order at the last moment, or even after the hatch is set. This throws everything out of gear. I heard of one hatchery operator who had a nervous breakdown and another who suffered from insomnia.

We sold pullet chicks and cockerel chicks. That I could understand, thought at first I confused "pullets" (six months old) with the chicks. But we also sold some strange creatures known as unsexed chicks. These, at first, I thought must be capons.

WHAT PUZZLED me was—How could a day-old chick be caponized? Well, once more my education was continued. "Unsexed" chicks are mixed cockerels and pullets, just as they came from the hatch. The night before the hatch is due to come off a person called a "sexer" arrives ready to start work at 3 o'clock the next morning, when the hatch is "sexed." He examines all the chicks as they come from the incubator and in some weird and wonderful way decides which are pullets and which are cockerels. Sexing is a highly skilled operation and highly paid. Sexers are scarce and travel all over the country doing their work during the hatching season. They work in the hatchery under a very strong light and are as quick as lightning—a good sexer handling as many as 1,000 chicks an hour and with such a percentage of accuracy that "sexed" chicks are guaranteed.

But pullets, cockerels and unsexed chicks were by no means the sum total of our worries. We sold several breeds and cross-breeds—all at different prices. Nor was that all—for the prices were continually changing according to the markets. I would just settle down comfortably to one price when the wretched thing would change. The same with eggs—egg prices never stay put.

There were many advantages to offset all this worry. To wake in the morning, to lie drowsily listening to the sounds of the farm coming to life, the farm hands going about their early chores; the birds crowing from north, south, east and west; to look out of the window at the glorious view and sniff the fresh country air! Fresh cream, butter and eggs for the table!

It was not long before I appreciated the neighborly attitude of the farm hands and their wives, who lived on the place. So many little kindnesses were done for me and for each other. It was during this time I lost my husband. I shall never forget the kindness of some of the roughest and gruffest men who unobtrusively cut wood and kindling and did many other little services for me. They, themselves, worked far harder than most do in a city; up at dawn and working till dusk. They had very little recreation or social life except the occasional trip to town on a Saturday night in the truck, when everyone looked forward to a show. Perhaps that is why personnel on the farm was continually changing, for although I was only there for a year, with the exception of the farm superintendent, I was the oldest employee when I left. They came and they went—all kinds and conditions, all nationalities, married and single, good workers and bad. We had a regular United Nations group at one time. Varying religions, varying political views (including one Communist), ex-air force officers, army officers, sailors, farmers with their own farms on the prairies taking a busman's holiday; English, French, German, Polish, Scottish, Irish and plain Canadian.

But, like the brook, the farm went on, and perhaps it will for ever! It has been going now for over 60 years.

VICTORIA ISSUED

By TED SHACKLEFORD

$1 GOLD PIECES

FOR SHEER ROMANCE there is no metal to compare with gold, and no coins to compare with gold coins.

Along with beaver pelts, tokens, card money, private banknote issues and foreign currency, gold played a prominent part in Canada's early coin history.

And perhaps the most important part was played by gold in British Columbia. With rich gold strikes in the province's early days, gold dust and nuggets played a prominent part in barter.

The main drawback to this was the variation in quality inherent in dust and nuggets, so private assayers in Victoria, Barkerville and New Westminster melted the gold down into small bars.

The small ingots were stamped by the assayers with weight and the fineness of the gold and this brought stability to the use of gold in barter. Before this dust and nuggets were discounted about 10 per cent to allow for the variation.

None of these small bars remain to this day, so far as is known—as regular coinage became available they were no longer needed and were melted down, but Canadian assay bars do exist in the form of modern samples for collectors.

A recent limited edition was produced in 24 carat, and some of these are owned by members of the Victoria Numismatic Society.

Some Victoria merchants issued their own gold one dollar pieces, about the size of a dime, in 1879. They were unofficial but were accepted among a circle of very prominent city businesses. There were other private issues from time to time.

Canada's first official gold coin was designed for British Columbia in 1862, but due to interference by the British colonial secretary, Lord Bulwer-Lytton, the project was stopped before it really started.

Only a handful of "patterns" were issued. The widely-credited story that the coins were withdrawn from circulation as they contained gold worth more than the face value is just that—a story.

It is hoped that B.C.'s early gold coinage can be made the subject of a future instalment.

The Dominion's first official gold coinage came with the opening of the Royal Canadian Mint in Ottawa in 1908. And although Canada was officially using the dollar system, the coins were sovereigns, almost identical to British sovereigns.

Actual value of a British gold sovereign at that period in history was $4.86 Canadian, but both the British and Canadian sovereigns were accepted without question as $5 pieces. The Canadian sovereigns had a small 'C" worked into the design to differentiate the two issues.

Canadian sovereigns were minted up to 1919, except for the years 1912 and 1915, and led to genuine Canadian $5 and $10 gold coins, minted in 1912, 1913 and 1914.

These gold coins in dollar denomination had the crowned head of King George V on the obverse and the reverse showed Canada's coat of arms, for the first time on any coin.

Although much pressure was brought to bear on the Canadian government through the years no further gold issues have been minted.

And as Canada is no longer on the gold standard it is very unlikely that any more gold coins will be produced.

Copies of B.C.'s $10 and $20 gold coins are owned by the provincial archives, together with silver copies of the coins.

Willard Ireland, provincial archivist, will be happy to display the valuable coins to visitors, although they are not kept on permanent display.

The silver copies were struck to test the dies used in minting the issue.